

## **SCHOOLS, MOSQUES AND RESTAURANTS: UNDERSTANDING TURKEY'S "SOFT POWER" IN AJARA**

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### **Abstract**

This research analyzes Turkish-Georgian relations, focusing on Turkish influence on Ajara and its formal and informal educational system, culture, and Turkey's use of “soft power.” This paper will review Turkey's main institutions and policies, political mechanisms, and sources of influence in Ajara. Specifically, it will cover the Muslim community in Ajara and address peculiarities in its educational system, culture, religion and "Gülen Movement" in context of Turkey’s foreign policy towards Georgia.

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, the South Caucasus region has been and continues to be a cradle of religious, national, and ethnic divergences. Currently, regional interests are clashing with global ones: Turkish and Iranian interests conflict with those of Russia, The United States, and the European Union. The shifts in relations of the aforementioned regional and global actors heavily influence events and livelihood in the South Caucasus. At present, Turkey has an especially active role in these political processes and today Turkey plays important role in the life of region's states.

After the “Justice and Development Party” (AKP) came into power in 2002, key changes took place in Turkish foreign policy. Over the past decade, Turkey became actively engaged in the political processes in the Middle East, South Caucasus, Central and East Asia. The South Caucasus,

which includes Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, has always remained important in Turkish foreign policy. To this end, Turkey and Georgia have friendly relations: the two countries are actively cooperating and collaborating in a plethora of fields such as energy, economy, trade, and others.

This paper draws upon several professional literary and academic sources in Armenian, Turkish, Russian and English. To present Turkey's role in Ajara's educational and cultural fields, this study incorporates the Turkey's foreign policy vision, focusing on its approaches to the South Caucasus and moreover, on Turkish foreign policy towards Georgia. This research also analyzes Turkey's main political institutions and organizations by investigating its use of "soft power" in conducting foreign policy.

It is important to note that the findings in this paper draw upon primary fieldwork from my trip to Ajara, of which include dialogues with residents and with six citizens of Turkey who live in and do business in Ajara. It also refers to a conversation-style interview with a group that conducted fieldwork in Ajara in April 2016 for an anthropological project titled "Caucasus, Conflict, Culture," which contains partnerships from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Germany, and is funded by the DAAD and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Additionally, the primary research used in this study considers two separate interviews: one with Ruslan Baramidze, a senior researcher at Shota Rustaveli University in Batumi, and the other with former general counsel of Armenia in Batumi Aram Grigoryan. All of the collected materials i.e. fieldwork, surveys, and interviews in conjunction with the aforementioned secondary research comprise the bulk of raw data used in this paper.

### **A brief historical overview**

Ajara is an autonomous republic located in southwest Georgia, occupying an area of approximately 3,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Ajara borders Turkey to the south and is surrounded by the Black Sea on its west and northwestern coasts. Ajara was occupied by the Ottoman Empire from 1614 until 1878. During the Russian-Turkish War (1877-1878,) the Russians occupied Ajara and other territories, which were granted to the Russian Empire by the

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Congress of Berlin in 1878<sup>1</sup>. In 1918, Georgia gained independence, which lasted until 1921 because it became a member of the Soviet Union. According to the Treaty of Kars (1921) signed between Turkey and three Transcaucasian states — Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan — Ajara remained as a part of Soviet Georgia.<sup>2</sup> In 1921, the Ajara Autonomous Soviet Republic was founded and even after Georgia became independent from the USSR in 1991, Ajara continues to maintain the status of an autonomous republic.

According to the 2014 census, the total population of Georgia is 3,714,000, of which 334,000 live in Ajara. The 2014 census also states that the Muslim population comprises 10.7% (398,700 people) of the total population of Georgia.<sup>3</sup> However, there are different data sets on the total Muslim population in Georgia: the European Stability Initiative claims it is 430,000,<sup>4</sup> the “Muslim Education Trust” organization finds it totals 574,179 people (~11% of the total population),<sup>5</sup> and Azerbaijani media estimates it is 500,000 people.<sup>6</sup> Although Christianity has always been the predominant religion in Georgia, Islam began to spread in Georgian

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<sup>1</sup>M. Bakhtadze, M. Vachnadze, V Guruli, *Istoria Gruzii s drevneyshikh vremen do nashikh dnei*, Tbilisi, 1993, pdf, 581-587pp. (М. Бахтадзе, М. Вачнадзе, В. Гурули, *История Грузии с древнейших времен до наших дней*, Тбилиси, 1993 г. с. 581-587)

<sup>2</sup> *Karskii dogovor o druzhbe mejdu Armyanskoy, Azerbayjanskoy, Gruzinskoy Sovetskimi Sotsialisticheskimi Respublikami i Turtsiei* (13.10.1921, Kars) (Карский договор о дружбе между Армянской, Азербайджанской, Грузинской Советскими Социалистическими Республиками и Турцией (13.10.1921, Карс)), [http://hrono.ru/dokum/192\\_dok/19211013kars.php](http://hrono.ru/dokum/192_dok/19211013kars.php) (Accessed on 07.08.2016)

<sup>3</sup> 2014 General Population Census, NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE OF GEORGIA (GEOSTAT), [http://geostat.ge/cms/site\\_images/\\_files/english/population/Census\\_release\\_ENG\\_2016.pdf](http://geostat.ge/cms/site_images/_files/english/population/Census_release_ENG_2016.pdf) (Accessed on 07.08.2016)

<sup>4</sup> Georgia Country Profile, European Stability Initiative [http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=321&country\\_ID=1&slide\\_ID=1](http://www.esiweb.org/index.php?lang=en&id=321&country_ID=1&slide_ID=1) (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

<sup>5</sup> Muslim Education Trust, <http://islamicweb.com/begin/population.htm> (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

<sup>6</sup> *Mechetsi v Gruzii ne stroyat*, 24 september, 2008 (Мечети в Грузии не строят, 24 СЕНТЯБРЯ 2008), <http://open.az/index.php?newsid=15826> (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

territories, including in present-day Ajara.<sup>7</sup> This is due to various conquests of the South Caucasus throughout different historical periods, beginning from as early on as the seventh and eighth centuries.

After conquering Georgian territories, Arabs and then Seljuk Turks tried to convert the local Christian population to Islam by basic means of forced Islamization. In both periods of Arab conquests and Seljuk domination, the main method of Islamization of Georgian territory and its population was the implementation of extremely burdening and high taxes, death threats, etc.<sup>8</sup> With regard to heavy taxes, this policy was overwhelmingly evident based on the fact that Seljuk leader Alp-Aslan (1063-1072) demanded the Georgian King to convert or to pay and implement the *jizya* (poll) tax.<sup>9</sup>

Forced Islamization policy became more widespread under the Ottoman Empire. Since the beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century, Ottomans established their dominance in western and southwestern Georgia by embarking on a policy of forced religious conversion of local Christian residents. Particularly, in Ajara, Islam began to spread during the period of Ottoman conquest and domination in the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, until the 1770s, Christians mainly controlled Ajara and gained sufficient impetus, making the process of Islamization quite complex since the 1820s<sup>10</sup>. According to N. Kakhidze, only in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Ottoman Turks able to consolidate their position and began to build places of prayer: the mosques.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup> G. Sanikidze and Ed. W. Walker, 'Islam and Islamic practices in Georgia', BPS Working Paper Series, University of California, Berkeley, 2004, p. 3

<sup>8</sup> G. Asatrian and H. Margarian, *The Muslim Community of Tiflis (8th-19th Centuries)*, Iran & the Caucasus Vol. 8, No. 1 (2004), p. 31, pdf

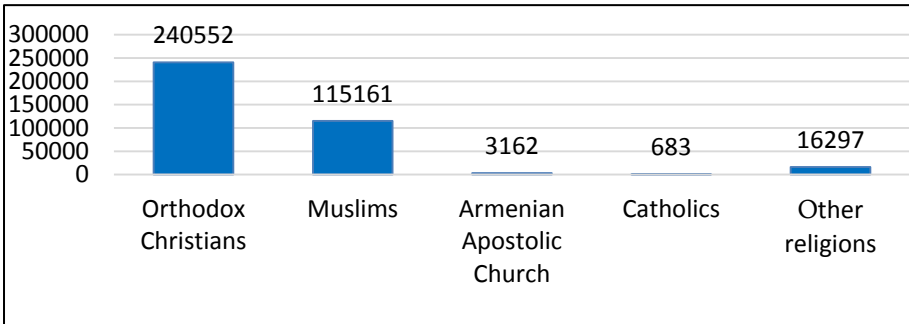
<sup>9</sup> Özdemir V., XII. ve XIII. Yüzyılda Türk-Gürcü münasebetleri (Türkiye Selçukları ve Doğu Anadolu Türk beylikleri döneminde), Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Selçuk Üniversitesi, Konya, 2011, s. 20. <http://acikerisim.selcuk.edu.tr:8080/xmlui/bitstream/handle/123456789/1437/308889.pdf?sequence=1> (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

<sup>10</sup> G. Sanikidze and Ed. W. Walker, op. cit. p.6

<sup>11</sup> R. Baramidze, *Islam i ego osobennosti v Adzarii*, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, South Caucasus, p. 2 (Руслан Барамидзе, *Ислам и его особенности в Аджарии*, с. 2), <https://www.academia.edu/10774144> (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

Until the Sovietization of Georgia (1921,) 158 mosques and, until 1929, five madrasas and 150 religious primary schools operated in Ajara.<sup>12</sup> However, mosques and madrasas were closed in the 1930s. In 1929, Muslim Religious Department of Ajara was closed: religion was banned in schools and related subjects were excluded from school curricula. The attitude towards religion began to change when the Central Mosque of Batumi and the Islamic religious and cultural centers reopened in the 1950s and 1980s, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

The center of Ajara is the city Batumi. Batumi hosts a central mosque for the Muslim community (“Orta Djame”) which was built in 1866. Researchers from the Niko Berdzhinshvili Institute (Batumi, Georgia) conducted fieldwork in a religious community in 2010. The findings are as follows: there are 184 working Muslim institutions in Ajara, of which 119 are mosques, 22 are mosque-like structures, 15 are places of prayer, 27 are madrasas, and one is a madrasa-place of prayer.<sup>14</sup>



According to the latest findings from the Statistical Department of the Ministry of Economy and Development of Georgia (2002,) the population by religion breakdown of Ajara consists of 240,552 Orthodox Christians, 115,161 Muslims, 3,162 followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church, 683

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, pp. 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Th. Liles, *Islam and Religious Transformation in Adjara*, European Centre for Minority Issues (ECMI), February 2012, p. 15 [http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx\\_lfpubdb/Working\\_Paper\\_57\\_En.pdf](http://www.ecmi.de/uploads/tx_lfpubdb/Working_Paper_57_En.pdf) (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

Catholics, and 16,297 representatives of other religions.<sup>15</sup> In 2006, The Statistical Department of Ajara calculated that Muslims and Orthodox Christians made up 30 and 63 percent of the total population, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Peculiarities of Turkish foreign policy towards Ajara**

From the 1980s and 1990s, there were notable changes in Turkey's foreign policy. After Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, changes in Turkish foreign policy became even more obvious. At its core, AKP ideology stipulates that Turkey must adopt an active policy in the region that was formerly part of the Ottoman Empire and use the historical-geographical possibilities in the territories of the Empire<sup>17</sup>.

Thus, after the collapse of the USSR, the South Caucasus became a territory for Turkey to spread its influence over. However, as former Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009-2014) and Prime Minister (2014-May 2016) of Turkey Ahmet Davutoglu notes, Turkey was not prepared psychologically to achieve hegemony in the region because of the economic crises and political ferments.<sup>18</sup>

To access the natural resources of Central Asia and the Caspian Sea becomes a particularly important issue for Turkey as the latter tries to take the role of being a "unique bridge" in transferring the Middle East's energy resources to Europe. In this context, Georgia is extremely important for

<sup>15</sup> I. Vladmiri, *Religioznie izmerenie politiki Turtsii v Adzarii i deyatelnost gruzinskoy pravoslavnoy tserkvi*, *Tsentralnaya Aziya i Kavkaz*, № 3, tom 14, 2011, p. 92 (И.Владимир, *Религиозное измерение политики Турции в Аджарии и деятельность Грузинской Православной церкви, Центральная Азия и Кавказ*, № 3, том 14, 2011, с. 92), <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/religioznoe-izmerenie-politiki-turtsii-v-adzharii-i-deyatelnost-gruzinskoy-pravoslavnoy-tserkvi> (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

<sup>16</sup> S. Mkrtychyan, *Vrastani Mowsowlmanner*, (Մ. Մկրտչյան, *Վրաստանի մուսուլմանները*) 29.09.2009, <http://new.religions.am/hy/article/vrastani-mowsowlmannere> (Accessed on 07.09.2016)

<sup>17</sup> A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2001, s. 178.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 128.

Turkey, which is due to the pivotal role of Georgia in the process of exporting Caspian and Central Asian energy resources to Europe. Furthermore, Georgia is a bridge for Turkey to contact Azerbaijan and Central Asian Turkic speaking countries.<sup>19</sup> Carnegie Foundation analyst Bayram Balci finds that Georgia is important for Turkey because it serves as a stable and as the shortest mode of transportation to and from the Caucasus and Central Asia. According to Balci, it is also important for Georgia to be involved in transit projects regarding Caspian energy resources, and since Turkey is a window to Europe.<sup>20</sup>

Turkish “soft power”<sup>21</sup> is of key importance in Turkey's foreign policy towards Georgia. Turkey managed to spread its influence over Georgia by using economic, political, cultural and educational tools of its “soft power.”

Ahmet Davutoglu has developed a different approach for Turkey's foreign policy based on the doctrine of "strategic depth". The main slogan of this new approach in Turkish foreign policy is known as "Zero problems with its neighbors," which implies that by increasing political dialogue without meddling in other countries domestic affairs, economic dependence

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<sup>19</sup> Vneshnepoliticheskie diskursi veduyushikh subyektov turetskoy politiki, pod red. V.A. Avatkova, Moskva, p. 66 (Внешнеполитический дискурс ведущих субъектов турецкой политики (2010 – лето 2015 г.), Под ред. В.А. Аваткова, Москва 2015, с. 66), [http://mgimo.ru/upload/iblock/561/LOCUS\\_Turkey\\_block.pdf](http://mgimo.ru/upload/iblock/561/LOCUS_Turkey_block.pdf) (Accessed on 18.09.2016)

<sup>20</sup> B. Balci, Strengths and Constraints of Turkish Policy in the South Caucasus, Insight Turkey, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/18/strengths-and-constraints-of-turkish-policy-in-south-caucasus-pub-55945> (Accessed on 18.09.2016)

<sup>21</sup> “Soft power” is a strategic concept of foreign policy that was created by American political scientist Joseph Nye. This concept is based on the fact that it is possible to have a significant influence on other countries, their foreign policy and on the position of the decision makers and even on the mood and attitude of the population of those countries not by means of military force, but by economic, cultural, scientific, political, humanitarian programs and partnerships, by dynamic activities of non-governmental organizations and cultural centers, through mass media. See Nye J. S., “Soft Power, Foreign Policy” No. 80, Twentieth Anniversary (Autumn, 1990), pp. 153-171.

and cultural consensus will occur and take hold.<sup>22</sup> Turkey's "soft power" played a significant role in executing this new approach, the main goal of which was to involve new countries and actors under Turkey's influence through economic development, and mutual achievements in science, education, culture, and technology.

Turkey paid special attention to its use of "soft power" in Georgia. Evidently, in order to spread its influence and maintain friendly relations with Georgia, it was necessary to ensure Turkey's adequate presence in a number of strategic areas of Georgia's economy; not exclusively as a vital geopolitical ally and as a tool of facilitated transportation and transit. As a result, political and economic goals and relations were complemented by cultural, educational, humanitarian, and religious programs, which aimed to form a positive position towards Turkey in Georgian society and within that, its Muslim community.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, through the use of "soft power" in Georgia, it is likely that the Turkish authorities have been trying to erase historical memories existing in Georgians' consciousness about the negative Ottoman past.

Turkey and Georgia are actively cooperating in the fields of economy, trade, energy. Since 2005, Turkey and Georgia established a visa-free travel regime.<sup>24</sup> After the "Rose Revolution" (2003) in Georgia, the different economic policies of the new government had a significant impact on the trade and economic relations between the two countries. In November 2007, Georgia and Turkey signed a Free Trade Agreement, and as soon as it took effect, bilateral trade volumes drastically increased.<sup>25</sup> Turkey has been a prominent source of Georgia's foreign trade since 2006.

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<sup>22</sup> A. Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007", *Insight Turkey*, Vol.10, No. 1 (January-March 2008), pp.77-96; Davutoğlu, "Principles of Turkish Foreign Policy", p. 80.  
<http://arsiv.setav.org/ups/dosya/9595.pdf> (Accessed on 27.09.2016)

<sup>23</sup> V. Ter-Matevosyan, *Cooperation paradigms in the South Caucasus Making sense of Turkish-Georgian relations*, *Varia*, 2014. No. 4. pp. 103-125, <https://eac.revues.org/689#tocto1n3> (Accessed on 27.09.2016)

<sup>24</sup> D. N. Göksel, *Turkey and Georgia: Zero-Problems? Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation*, June 2013, pdf. p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p.8



In 2015 trade turnover between Georgia and Turkey reached ~1.51 billion dollars, 1.33 billion of which was comprised of Turkish exports.<sup>26</sup> The increase in trade volumes was also recorded in Turkey's direct investments in Georgia. After the United States, Turkey has the most investments in Georgia; Turkish investors are predominantly interested in the textile industry, agriculture, construction and infrastructure, and energy sectors of the Georgian economy.<sup>27</sup> In the period between 2006-2015 Turkey's investments in Georgia have reached totally to ≈913 million US dollars, while in 1997-2005 the investments were totally only ≈159 million US dollars<sup>28</sup>. In 1999, an organization called Gürcü ve Türk İşadamları Derneği – Association of Georgian and Turkish Businessmen (GÜRTIAD) was founded in aims to protect and promote interests of Turkish investors in Georgia.<sup>29</sup>

Between 2006 and 2007, the Georgian market opened up to increased Turkish capital and investments. This timeframe also coincided with Turkey's search process for new markets by the Turkish "Green Capital" and the business elite known as the "Anatolian Tigers," resulting in a vast number of Turkish enterprises actively penetrating into the Georgian market.<sup>30</sup> In October 2015, the Independent Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (MÜSİAD - Müstakil Sanayici ve İşadamları Derneği — MÜSİAD) Georgia Branch was opened in Batumi city, which is the main driving force of Turkish "Green capital" and the Islamic

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<sup>26</sup> L. Aleksanyan, Politika "Myagkoy sili" Turtsii v otnoshenii Gruzii, Diplomaticheskaya akademiya Ministertsvo inostrannikh del Rossiyskoy Federatsii, Moskva, p. 74 (Лариса Алексанян, Политика «мягкой силы» Турции в отношении Грузии, Дипломатическая академия МИД РФ. Москва, с.74)

<sup>27</sup> A. S. Dzilavyan, Neoosmanskaya doktrina i geopoliticheskie interesi Turtsii v Zakavkazie i Tsentralnoy Azii, Vestnik Rossiysko-Armyanskogo universiteta, No 2, Yerevan, p. 84 (А.С. Джилаван, Неоосманская доктрина и геополитические интересы Турци в закавказье и центральной Азии, Вестник Российско-Армянского (Славянского) университета № 2, Ереван 2014, с. 84)

<sup>28</sup> National Statistics Office of Georgia, foreign investment [http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p\\_id=2231&lang=eng](http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=2231&lang=eng) (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>29</sup> Gürcü ve Türk İşadamları derneği, <http://www.gurtiad.ge/tr/Icerik.ASP?ID=191> (Accessed on 27.09.2016)

<sup>30</sup> V. Ter-Matevosyan, op. cit.

bourgeoisie.<sup>31</sup> Also, there are two branches of Turkish commercial banks in Tbilisi and Batumi (T.C. Ziraat Bankası lı Türkiye İş Bankası).

In addition to the rise in Turkish influence on Georgia's economy, Turkey is successfully increasing its presence in the cultural, religious, educational and humanitarian fields of Georgia. Turkey began applying leverage to spread its religious, ideological and cultural influence in Georgia. The main structures of creating "soft power" policy in Georgia are Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and initiatives coordinated by three state institutes attached to the Prime Ministry of Turkey – the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türkiye İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Idaresi – TİKA), Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Center and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşler Başkanlığı).<sup>32</sup>

The TİKA has implemented large-scale projects in Georgia since 1994. According to the 2012 annual report, Georgia has received 4.23% of TİKA's overall financial, vocational, and technical support, making Georgia the seventh largest beneficiary of TİKA.<sup>33</sup> TİKA programs include organizing educational projects (vocational, language teaching,) repairing and furnishing educational centers, and improving social and economic infrastructures and services, healthcare, and drinking water and sanitation. In 2012, TİKA reconstructed one of the schools in Batumi. After it was built, TİKA opened a foreign language teaching center. Additionally, TİKA organizes projects to improve the quality of drinking water.<sup>34</sup> It is important to note that the research of TİKA's annual report allows that beneficiaries of TİKA are mostly located in the Muslim-populated territories in Georgia, especially in Ajara: only a few programs were implemented in Tbilisi and Gori. Furthermore, since 2000, TİKA has carried out the "Turkology" project in Georgia. Under the "Turkology" framework, TİKA established

<sup>31</sup> MÜSİAD Gürcistan Ofisi Açıldı, 02.10.2015, <http://www.musiad.org.tr/tr-tr/haberler/musiad-gurcistan-ofisi-acildi-732> (Accessed on 27.09.2016)

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> TİKA 2012 Annual Report, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, ed. N. Yıldız, pp. 24-25, <http://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/oldpublication/tika2012AnnRep.pdf> (Accessed on 28.09.2016)

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

Departments of Turkish Studies in Georgian universities, aiming to increase the interest of Georgian society towards Turkey.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most powerful tools of Turkey's "soft power" is the Yunus Emre Cultural center founded in 2009. In May 2012, Yunus Emre opened its branch in Georgia's Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.<sup>36</sup> This center contains various educational and cultural programs and supports research projects relevant to the spread of Turkish language, culture, art, and history.<sup>37</sup> The opening ceremony of this center was made by Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey Bülent Arınç. In his opening speech, former chairman of the Yunus Emre Foundation Ali Fuat Bilkan stated that Turkish-Georgian political and economic relations "had attained a perfect level, thus the establishment of Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Center in Tbilisi would be a bridge between the Turkish and the Georgian languages, culture, and arts. It would also heighten the cooperation between the two countries."<sup>38</sup>

Notably, in December 2015 during a seminar organized for teachers in the Consulate General of Turkey in Batumi, the head of the "Yunus Emre" cultural center Hayati Develi announced the following:

*"Due to the great interest and demand for the Turkish language in Georgia, "Yunus Emre" cultural center will open its branch in Batumi."*<sup>39</sup>

One of the important institutions in Turkey's "soft power" policy in Georgia is the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet.) Diyanet's activities predominantly refer to religious and spiritual issues. Diyanet helps Georgian Muslims organize the hajj, provides training to the imams of preachers in mosques, trains theologians, provides scholarships for

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<sup>35</sup> L. Aleksanyan, loc. cit.

<sup>36</sup> TÜRKİYE – GÜRCİSTAN İLİŞKİLERİ BİLGİ NOTU, Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Tiflis Büyükelçiliği, <http://tbilisi.emb.mfa.gov.tr/ShowInfoNotes.aspx?ID=254502> (Accessed on 28.09.2016)

<sup>37</sup> Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, <http://www.yee.org.tr/tr/misyon> (Accessed on 28.09.2016)

<sup>38</sup> V. Ter-Matevosyan, op. cit.

<sup>39</sup> Batum'da Yunus Emre Enstitüsü Açılacak, 12 Aralık 2015, <http://www.haberler.com/batum-da-yunus-emre-enstitusu-acilacak-7962872-haber/> (Accessed on 28.09.2016)

postgraduate studies, and disseminates Islamic literature in Georgian language. It also coordinates financial support and consulting services in building and restoring mosques.<sup>40</sup> Diyanet sponsors free secular higher education and Qur'an courses for Muslims living in Ajara, which are particularly popular among younger Adjaran Muslims.<sup>41</sup> Muftis and imams get their education in Turkey's religious institutions, and the Muslims of Ajara are also attending Koran courses in Turkey. In 2008, 139 students from Georgia participated in Qur'an courses in Turkey.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, Diyanet cooperates with the official Muftiate in Batumi.

In addition to utilizing formal organizations, Turkey also uses informal institutions in implementing its "soft power" policy. In this context, educational institutions belonging to Fethullah Gulen's network are of major significance.<sup>43</sup> Followers of the Gülen movement first came to Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union but actively started operating after 1992.<sup>44</sup> Commonly known as "Gülen Schools," they operate in Georgian territory under the auspices of the "Çağlar Educational Institutions" (Çağlar Eğitim Kurumları – ÇEK), established in February 1993. To date, the ÇEK has established seven schools in Georgia, among them, are Tbilisi Private Demirel School, founded in 1993, and Refaiddin Şahin Friendship Primary Secondary School of Batumi, which was established in 1994.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Th. Liles and B. Balci, GEORGIA, p. 12, <https://spire.sciencespo.fr/hdl:/2441/1a4ocdgpim8lbb75p50g6q8uv8/resources/georgia-2014-final-mb.pdf> (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>41</sup> Th. Liles, *op. cit.*

<sup>42</sup> Ş. Korkut, The Diyanet of Turkey and Its Activities in Eurasia after the Cold War, *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, Tomus 28, p. 132. <http://src-hokudai-ac.jp/publicn/acta/28/06Korkut.pdf> (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>43</sup> Fethullah Gulen is the founder of "Hizmet" religious movement (also known by the name of Gülen movement). He is considered to be one of the followers of Islam preacher Said Nursi, who founded "Nurcu" religious movement. The main purpose of Gülen and his movement to spread Islamic and Pan-Turkic ideas, for what he has established a wide network of educational centers and schools.

<sup>44</sup> L. Aleksanyan, *loc. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> V. Ter-Matevosyan, *op. cit.*

Both the administration and the instruction at the Gülen schools are largely run by Turkish citizens, but there are also teachers from Georgia. In these schools, there is a specific focus and emphasis on the participation in Turkish language Olympiads organized in Turkey and also in Georgia<sup>46</sup>. Some sources note that even though these schools belong to Gulen's network, no overt propaganda is visible neither for the Gülen movement nor for Turkey. Meanwhile, the Turkish flag flies along with the Georgian flag in front of all these school buildings, signifying that students and teachers encounter Turkey-associated symbols every day.<sup>47</sup> But "Gulen's school" were playing important role in Turkey's "soft power" policy until the appearance of dissidence between Turkey's president and the founder of "Hizmet" religious movement Fethullah Gulen.

On July 18, 2016, Consul of Turkey in Batumi Yasin Temizkan announced that he would ask the Georgian government to close the local private R. Şahin school associated with Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen. It was connected to the failed coup attempt on July 15, for which Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan blamed Gulen. The Consul Yasin Temizkan claimed that the R. Şahin school, which teaches five to 12-year-old children, *"is not serving the government; they're serving terrorist groups."* The Gülen network, he claimed, uses such schools "to strengthen their own position." Temizkan also stated that he would petition for Georgia's Ministry of Education in to close the school as soon as possible. In the meantime, he called on parents to withdraw their children from Gülen school in Georgia. After speaking with Batumi broadcaster TV25, school Principal Elguja Davitadze denied the allegations.<sup>48</sup> During a meeting with Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Gigi Gigiadze, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to Georgia Zeki Levent Gümrukçi

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Georgia: Turkey Pushes to Close "Terrorist" Gülen School, 18 June, 2016, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/79721>, (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

assured that the interview of the Turkish Consul General in Batumi was misrepresented and his statements were misinterpreted by the media.<sup>49</sup>

The Minister of Education and Science of Georgia Alexandre Jejelava announced the following:

*“Gulen is financing a lot of educational centers and there are also schools in Georgia, that belong to Gulen’s network, but the education language of these schools is Georgian. We have no information about the links between these schools with the terrorist groups. There are some laws about the conditions of accreditation and if they have been violated, then appropriate measures will be implemented, up to launching a criminal case.”*<sup>50</sup>

On February 3, 2017, the council of the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement revoked the Şahin School’s authorization to carry out educational activities. According to The Center, the Şahin School committed “serious violations of the rules about enrollment and procedures.”<sup>51</sup>

Another interesting case is that, on May 25, 2017, Tbilisi City Court sentenced one of the managers of Demirel Privet School, established by Gülen movement, Mustafa Emre Chabuk to three-month pre-extradition detention. Chabuk was arrested in May on charges of cooperation with "terrorist organization". Turkish side demanded his detention. After these nongovernmental organizations have called on the Georgian government to refrain from extradition of Mustafa Emre Çabuk to Turkey<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister Gigi Gigiadze has met the Ambassador of Turkey to Georgia, <http://mfa.gov.ge/News/შეხვედრა-თურქეთის-რესპუბლიკის-გლბთან.aspx?CatID=5&lang=en-US> (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>50</sup> Perezhivut li tureckie shkoly v Gruzii. Konflikt Erdogana s Gyulenom (Переживут ли турецкие школы в Грузии конфликт Эрдогана с Гюленом?) <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2016/07/29/perezhivut-li-tureckie-shkoly-v-gruzii-konflikt-erdogana-s-gyulenom>, (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>51</sup> Georgia cracks down on private school linked to Gulen network, Feb 6, 2017, <http://dfwatch.net/georgia-cracks-down-on-private-school-linked-to-gulen-network-47552> (Accessed on 06.02.2017)

<sup>52</sup> Protest in support of Mustafa Emre Cabuk, Demirel College Manager, <http://1tv.ge/en/news/view/164062.html> (Accessed on 01.06.2017)

Remarkably, regarding Turkey's influence on Georgia's educational system, Turkey opened a new school in Batumi on September 19, 2016. According to Turkey's state news agency, "Anadolu," the school is entirely financed by Turkey and will be accessible to Turkish citizens in Batumi. Furthermore, Tufan Karadeniz, the education counselor at the Turkish embassy in Tbilisi, said in Anadolu that the school would follow Turkish curricula and will be supervised by Turkey's National Education Ministry.<sup>53</sup>

According to the Ministry of Education of Ajara, it hadn't been informed about the school Turkey opened in Batumi. The Ministry also found that the construction of the school is illegal as it lacks a construction permit by Batumi City Hall, and the building company has been fined several times for illegal construction work.<sup>54</sup> The Minister of Education and Science of Georgia Alexandre Jejelava mentioned that the school has not passed the accreditation according to current Georgian legislation. Minister Jejelava also expressed dissatisfaction that the school leadership did not decide to invite Ministry officials of Georgia to the opening ceremony. The Consul General of Turkey, Yasin Temizkan, explained that the new school in Ajara is only for Turkish children whose families live in Batumi. Moreover, the teachers in the school are Turkish citizens. He also claimed that the school has not officially opened as their priority has been to launch a school for the new academic year, which explains why the Georgian side was not invited to the recent opening ceremony.<sup>55</sup>

Later, Minister Jejelava readdressed this issue by announcing the following:

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<sup>53</sup> Gürcistan'da ilk Türk devlet okulu açıldı, 19.09.2016  
<http://aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/gurcistanda-ilk-turk-devlet-okulu-acildi/648494>  
(Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>54</sup> Turetskaya shkola otkrilas v Batumi 20.09.2016 (Турецкая школа открылась в Батуми, 20.09.2016, на грузинском),  
<http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/regioni/397955>(Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>55</sup> Turkey Opens Unlicensed State School in Batumi, 23.09.2016,  
<http://georgiatoday.ge/news/4720> (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

*“Some wrong messages were spread in relation to the school. We have had communication with the Turkish side for months. We had an agreement with the Turkish side and the agreement is still valid.”*

According to Minister Jejelava, Turkish children will study at the school in its initial stages, while Georgian children will be able to study there after the institution gets accredited.<sup>56</sup>

It can be concluded that Turkey is using its "soft power" to increase its multilateral influence on all spheres of Georgia, namely in education. The main goal of Turkey's "soft power" institutions is to form positive images and attitudes towards Turkey among the population and decision-makers of Georgian political life.

Generally, there is some concern among part of the Georgian population toward Turkish expansion over the economy, cultural, education and other spheres. In this context, it is important to consider that Georgians sometimes protest against Turkish expansion in Ajara. For example, in September 2016, Georgians held several protests in Sarpi village and in Batumi city against the expansion of Turkey in Ajara.<sup>57</sup> On the contrary, some circles are in favor of Turkish investments and find that they greatly benefit Ajara's economy.<sup>58</sup>

A Georgian public opinion survey conducted in 2015 by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) shows the following:<sup>59</sup>

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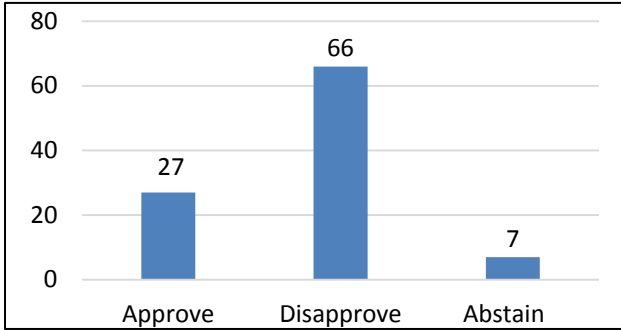
<sup>56</sup> Georgian children will be able to study at the Turkish school after it gets accreditation - Education Minister, (Accessed on 23.10.2016), 23.09.2016, <http://www.interpressnews.ge/en/society/81457> (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>57</sup> Gruzini proveli aktsiyu protiv ekonomicheskoy ekspansii Turtsii v Adzarii, na gruzinskom (Грузины провели акцию против экономической экспансии Турции Аджарии, см. на грузинском), <http://www.info9.ge/regionebi/156672> (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>58</sup> Interview with members of the group, that conducted fieldworks in Ajara within the anthropological project "Caucasus, Conflict, Culture" ("CCC"), 09 September, 2016, Yerevan

<sup>59</sup> Caucasus Research Resource Center, Cross-country datasets, <http://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cross-country/> Caucasus Barometer 2015 Georgia dataset. (Accessed on 23.10.2016)



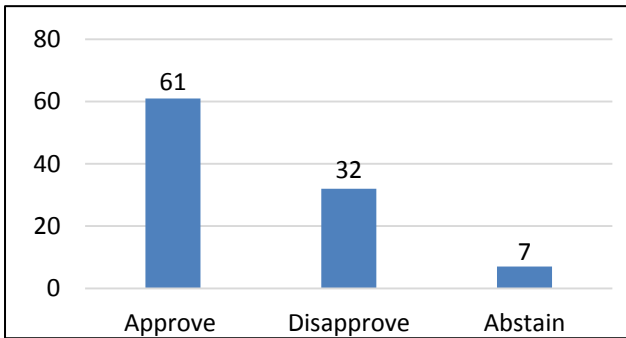


**Would you approve or disapprove of women of Georgian ethnicity marrying Turks?**

66 % – disapprove

27 % – approve

7 % – abstain



**What do you think of doing joint business with the Turks?**

32 % – disapprove

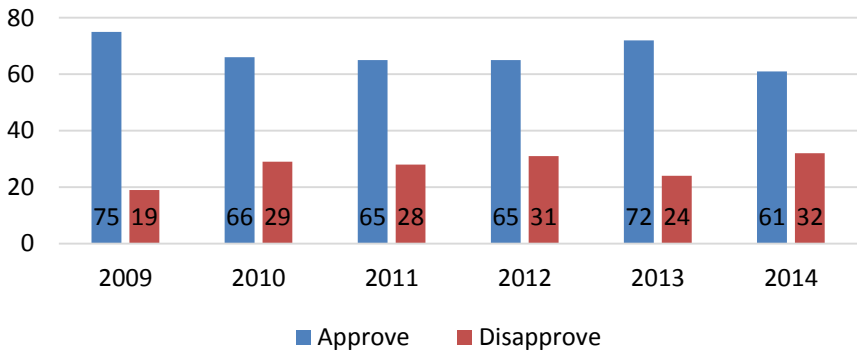
61 % – approve

7 % – abstain

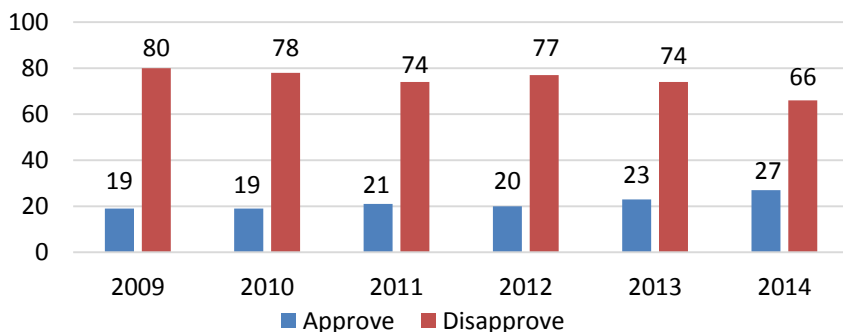
By analyzing public opinion survey results over the span of several recent years, the data can show the changes in the dynamics of public opinion:

Date	Would you approve or disapprove of women of Georgian ethnicity marrying Turks? <sup>60</sup>	What do you think of doing joint business with the Turks?
2009	19% approve, 80% disapprove	75% approve, 19% disapprove
2010	19% approve, 78% disapprove	66% approve, 29% disapprove
2011	21% approve, 74% disapprove	65% approve, 28% disapprove
2012	20% approve, 77% disapprove	65% approve, 31% disapprove
2013	23% approve, 74% disapprove	72% approve, 24% disapprove
2015	27% approve, 66% disapprove	61% approve, 32% disapprove

### Would you approve or disapprove of women of Georgian ethnicity marrying Turks?



<sup>60</sup> It is very common in Ajara Muslim-Christian mixed families, where the customs and traditions of these two religions demonstrate a unique combination, despite the fact that according to Muslim Islamic law, men can marry only with the religious representatives who are "People of the Book» (Ahl al -Kitāb), for example, Christians, and Jews, but a Muslim woman cannot marry a representative of another religion.



### **What do you think of doing joint business with the Turks?**

Based on these public opinion survey findings, it is clear that public opinion on these issues in Georgia is dynamic. Further, the approval rating of the population about question of doing business with Turks has decreased from 2009 to 2015. On the other hand, the approval rating among Turks about the question of marrying ethnically Georgian women has increased from 2009 to 2015.

In this context of studying the educational sphere in Ajara, it is crucial to speak about the student, whose religion is Islam and about wearing religious headscarves (hijab) in educational institutions. In Georgia, there is no ban on wearing headscarves in educational institutions, but it is generally accepted that the girls can only cover their heads: complete hijabs are unacceptable. However, it is unpopular to wear headscarves in Batumi, and typically women start to wear them after marriage.<sup>61</sup>

At the same time, based on primary surveys in Ajara, it is evident that young Muslim girls often avoid wearing headscarves, because it is not embraced publicly. Particularly, during the interviews conducted in Batumi city, one of the students noted that she liked to wear a headscarf in Turkey,

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with the senior researcher of Shota Rustaveli State University (Batumi) Ruslan Baramidze, 30 September, 2016, Yerevan

but she felt uncomfortable to wear a headscarf in Ajara.<sup>62</sup> The other student noted that Georgia is a Christian country and Islamic symbols should not be shown publicly.<sup>63</sup>

One of the debated issues in Georgia is Turkey's initiatives for rebuilding of the "Azizie" mosque or construction of new mosques in Georgia. For this reason, the Georgian Orthodox Church is especially against Turkish presence in Ajara.<sup>64</sup> It is crucial to note that it is several years since Georgian and Turkish Ministries of Foreign Affairs were negotiating about reconstruction Turkish cultural heritage in Georgia and Georgian cultural heritage in Turkey, but they have not reached any agreement yet.<sup>65</sup>

There is the narrative that Christians are against the rebuilding of the "Azizie" mosque in Ajara or construction of any new mosques in Georgia. This is due to the widely circulated claim by the local people Christian by the belief that not every Muslim in Ajara maintains Muslim traditions "thoroughly" including the visits to a Mosque, while many of them do also things that are inappropriate for a Muslim. This stipulates people to assume that Turkey is following its political interests by reconstructing (advocating for reconstruction of) the Azizie mosque.<sup>66</sup> Georgian Church leaders, some politicians, parties, and NGOs also speak up against the construction of new mosques reasoning the idea with the existence of hundreds of mosques in Ajara, while the number of churches does not exceed forty.<sup>67</sup> However, some Christians identify that it is better to build mosques than casinos.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Interview with members of the group, that conducted fieldworks in Ajara within the anthropological project "CCC", 09 September, 2016, Yerevan

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with the former general counsel of Armenia in Batumi Aram Grigoryan, 13 September, 2016, Yerevan

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Interview with members of the group, that conducted fieldworks in Ajara within the anthropological project "CCC", 09 September, 2016, Yerevan

<sup>67</sup> Georgian Patriarchate Suggests Turkey Allow Services In Christian Churches In Return For Allowing A Mosque To Be Built In Georgia, Tbilisi, April 1, 2013 <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/english/60586.htm>, (Accessed on 23.10.2016)

<sup>68</sup> Interview with members of the group, that conducted fieldworks in Ajara within the anthropological project "CCC", 09 September, 2016, Yerevan

## **Conclusion**

- Islam began to spread in Ajara during its conquest and domination by the Ottoman Empire between the 15th and 19th centuries. Nowadays, the Muslim population comprises 30 percent of the total population of Ajara. Besides Muslim citizens of Georgia, there is a large amount of Turkish Muslim citizens living and doing businesses in Ajara.

- Based on this study's observations, fieldwork, and interviews, it is conclusive that the number, mere presence and, therefore, the businesses and investments of Turkey's citizens in Ajara are rising. First, Georgia is playing a significant role for Turkey, because it is considered as a unique bridge for transferring Caspian energetic resources to Europe. Additionally, Turkey is linked with Azerbaijan and the Central Asian Turkic-speaking countries through Georgia. These factors, as well as the investments of Turkish citizens in Georgia — especially in Ajara — have made the economies of the two countries interdependent. In turn, this economic relationship has led to the spread of Turkish cultural, educational and humanitarian organizations to enter and permeate in Georgia, mainly in Ajara.

- Turkey's initiatives in Georgia's cultural, educational, religious and humanitarian spheres are aimed to form a positive attitude and position among Georgian society towards Turkey. Therefore, the main beneficiary of Turkey's investments in educational and cultural fields is the Muslim population. Several Turkish organizations are actively involved in educational fields and initiatives by opening new schools, rebuilding schools, and creating other educational institutions in Ajara. In this context, the role of Gulen network's schools is vital because they contribute to the spread of the Turkish language, culture and history, and Islamic ideology among Georgian youth.

- Some social and political figures, analysts, and other circles of the Muslim community in Georgia are in favor of Turkish investments and claim that they greatly benefit Ajara's economy. On the contrary, there is concern and caution among some circles of Georgia's population towards

Turkish expansion over the economic, cultural, educational and other spheres.

In summarizing the results of the research, this study concludes that apart from economic investments, Turkey makes efforts to create a more pro-Turkish position among the population of Ajara. This means that the Turkish authorities realize that only by economic factors they cannot keep dependency of Ajara from Turkey, as there are also other countries, particularly the United States, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and other countries that have businesses and investments in Ajara. This explains why Turkey also uses educational initiatives and cultural tools to increase its Turkish influence in Georgian society, and mainly relies on the Muslim population of Ajara to do so. After a brief look at Turkey's history, it can be argued that the current situation is not a unique case. In the past, Turkey has pursued a similar policy towards the Sanjak of Alexandretta, which was a part of Syria and became a Turkish province in 1939 as a result of Turkish foreign policy. Therefore, it can be argued that Turkish citizens' investments and initiatives in educational, cultural, and humanitarian fields are measures to maintain Turkey's influence on Ajara. In this context, the concerns of some circles of the population, politicians, and intellectuals are not groundless.

**ԴՊՐՈՑՆԵՐ, ՍԶԿԻԹՆԵՐ ԵՎ ՌԵՍՏՈՐԱՆՆԵՐ.**

**ՀԱՍԿԱՆԱԼՈՎ ԹՈՒՐՔԻԱՅԻ ՓԱՓՈՒԿ ՈՒԺԸ ԱԶԱՐԻԱՅՈՒՄ**

**Ամփոփագիր**

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հարաբերություններ, իսլամ, Աջարիայի իսլամադավան բնակչություն*

Սույն հետազոտությունը անդրադառնում է թուրք-վրացական հարաբերություններին, մասնավորապես, տնտեսական, ռազմական, էներգետիկայի և այլ ոլորտներում երկու երկրների համագործակցությանը, թուրքական ազդեցությանը Աջարիայում, ինչպես նաև թուրքական «փափուկ ուժի» կիրառմանը, դրա առանձնահատկություններին, հիմնական կառույցներին, մեխանիզմներին, գյուլենական շարժման դերին Վրաստանում: Հարավային Կովկասը միշտ էլ պատմության ողջ ընթացքում գտնվել է կրոնների, քաղաքակրթությունների, պետությունների բախման կիզակետում: Ներկայում այս տարածաշրջանում բախվում են ինչպես, տարածաշրջանային դերակատարների՝ Թուրքիայի, Իրանի, այնպես էլ գլոբալ դերակատարների՝ Ռուսաստանի, ԱՄՆ-ի, ԵՄ-ի շահերը: Այդ դերակատարների հարաբերությունների փոփոխությունները իրենց ազդեցությունն են ունենում Հվ. Կովկասում ընթացող իրադարձությունները վրա: Այդ գործընթացներում ներկայում ակտիվ դերակատարում ունի նաև Թուրքիան: Թուրքիայի արտաքին քաղաքականության մեջ միշտ էլ շատ կարևոր է եղել Հվ. Կովկասի տարածաշրջանը: Թուրքիան Վրաստանի հետ ունի բարիդրացիական հարաբերություններ, երկու երկրները ակտիվ համագործակցում են էներգետիկայի, տնտեսության, առևտրի և այլ ոլորտներում: